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"The Sphinx," by Oscar Wilde, with decorations by Charles Ricketts (1894)

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THE SPHINX

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BOOK IS LIMITED FOR
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TO
MARCEL SCHWOB
IN FRIENDSHIP
AND ADMIRATION

THE SPHINX BY OSCAR WILDE



WITH DECORATIONS BY CHARLES RICKETTS

LONDON MDCCCXCIV
ELKIN MATHEWS AND JOHN LANE, AT THE SIGN OF THE BODLEY HEAD.



N A DIM CORNER OF MY ROOM FOR LONGER THAN MY
FANCY THINKS

A BEAUTIFUL AND SILENT SPHINX HAS WATCHED ME THROUGH THE SHIFTING GLOOM.

INVIOLEATE AND IMMOBILE SHE DOES NOT RISE SHE DOES NOT STIR

FOR SILVER MOONS ARE NAUGHT TO HER AND NAUGHT TO HER THE SUNS THAT REEL.

RED FOLLOWS GREY ACROSS THE AIR THE WAVES OF MOONLIGHT EBB AND FLOW

BUT WITH THE DAWN SHE DOES NOT GO AND IN THE NIGHTTIME SHE IS THERE.

DAWN FOLLOWS DAWN AND NIGHTS GROW OLD AND ALL THE WHILE THIS CURIOUS CAT
LIES COUCHING ON THE CHINESE MAT WITH EYES OF SATIN RIMMED WITH GOLD,

UPON THE MAT SHE LIES AND LEERS AND ON THE TAWNY THROAT OF HER

FLUTTERS THE SOFT AND SILKY FUR OR RIPPLES TO HER POINTED EARS.

COME FORTH MY LOVELY SENESCHAL! SO SOMNOLENT, SO STATUESQUE!

COME FORTH YOU EXQUISITE GROTESQUE! HALF WOMAN AND HALF ANIMAL!

COME FORTH MY LOVELY LANGUOROUS SPHINX! AND PUT YOUR HEAD UPON MY KNEE!

AND LET ME STROKE YOUR THROAT AND SEE YOUR BODY SPOTTED LIKE THE LYNX!

AND LET ME TOUCH THOSE CURVING CLAWS OF YELLOW IVORY AND GRASP

THE TAIL THAT LIKE A MONSTROUS ASP COILS ROUND YOUR HEAVY VELVET PAWS!



A THOUSAND WEARY CENTURIES ARE THINE WHILE I HAVE HARDLY SEEN
SOME TWENTY SUMMERS CAST THEIR GREEN FOR AUTUMN'S GAUDY LIVERIES.

BUT YOU CAN READ THE HIEROGLYPHS ON THE GREAT SANDSTONE OBELISKS,
AND YOU HAVE TALKED WITH BASILISKS, AND YOU HAVE LOOKED ON HIPPOGRIFFS.

O TELL ME, WERE YOU STANDING BY WHEN ISIS TO OSIRIS KNELT?
AND DID YOU WATCH THE EGYPTIAN MELT HER UNION FOR ANTONY

AND DRINK THE JEWEL-DRUNKEN WINE AND BEND HER HEAD IN MIMIC AWE
TO SEE THE HUGE PROCONSUL DRAW THE SALTED TUNNY FROM THE BRINE?

AND DID YOU MARK THE CYPRIAN KISS WHITE ADON ON HIS CATAFALQUE?
AND DID YOU FOLLOW AMENALK, THE GOD OF HELIOPOLIS?

AND DID YOU TALK WITH THOTH, AND DID YOU HEAR THE MOON-HORNED IO WEEP?
AND KNOW THE PAINTED KINGS WHO SLEEP BENEATH THE WEDGE-SHAPED PYRAMID?



L

IFT UP YOUR LARGE BLACK SATIN EYES WHICH ARE LIKE CUSHIONS WHERE ONE
SINKS!

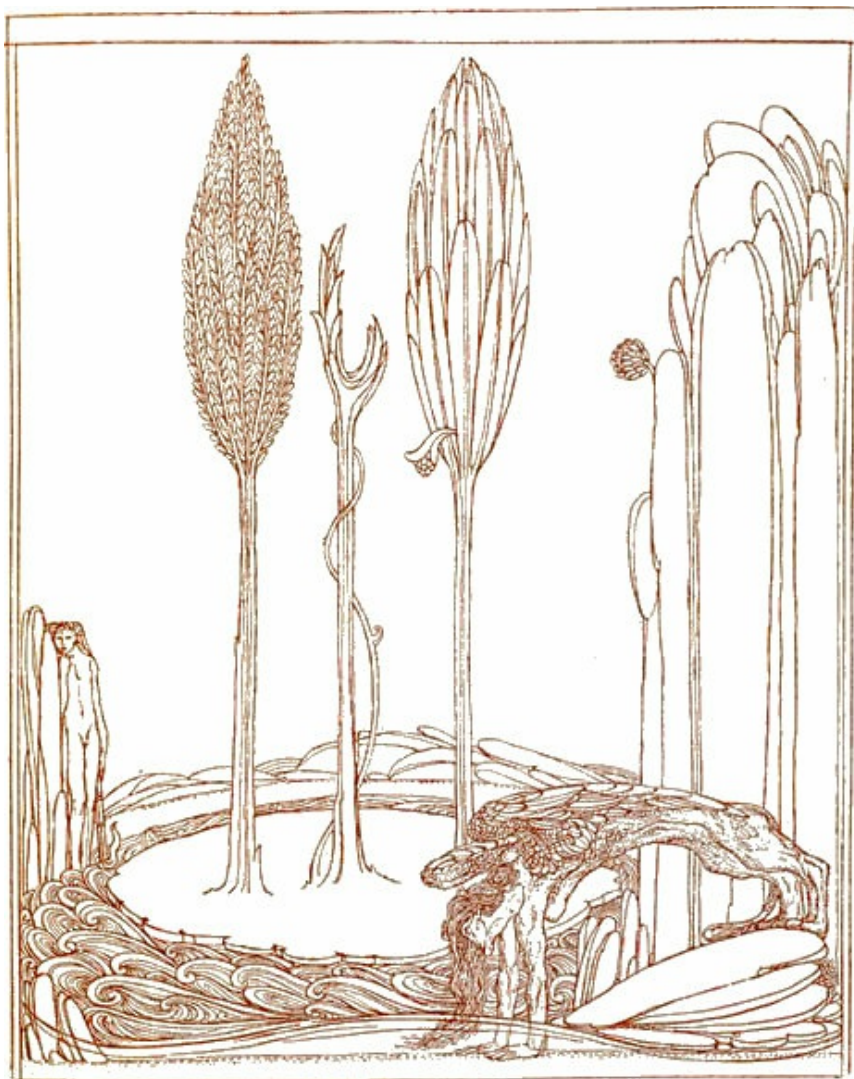
FAWN AT MY FEET FANTASTIC SPHINX! AND SING ME ALL YOUR MEMORIES!

SING TO ME OF THE JEWISH MAID WHO WANDERED WITH THE HOLY CHILD,
AND HOW YOU LED THEM THROUGH THE WILD, AND HOW THEY SLEPT BENEATH YOUR SHADE.

SING TO ME OF THAT ODOROUS GREEN EVE WHEN COUCHING BY THE MARGE
YOU HEARD FROM ADRIAN'S GILDED BARGE THE LAUGHTER OF ANTINOUS

AND LAPPED THE STREAM AND FED YOUR DROUTH AND WATCHED WITH HOT AND HUNGRY
STARE

THE IVORY BODY OF THAT RARE YOUNG SLAVE WITH HIS POMEGRANATE MOUTH!



SING TO ME OF THE LABYRINTH IN WHICH THE TWY-FORMED BULL WAS STALLED!
SING TO ME OF THE NIGHT YOU CRAWLED ACROSS THE TEMPLE'S GRANITE PLINTH
WHEN THROUGH THE PURPLE CORRIDORS THE SCREAMING SCARLET IBIS FLEW

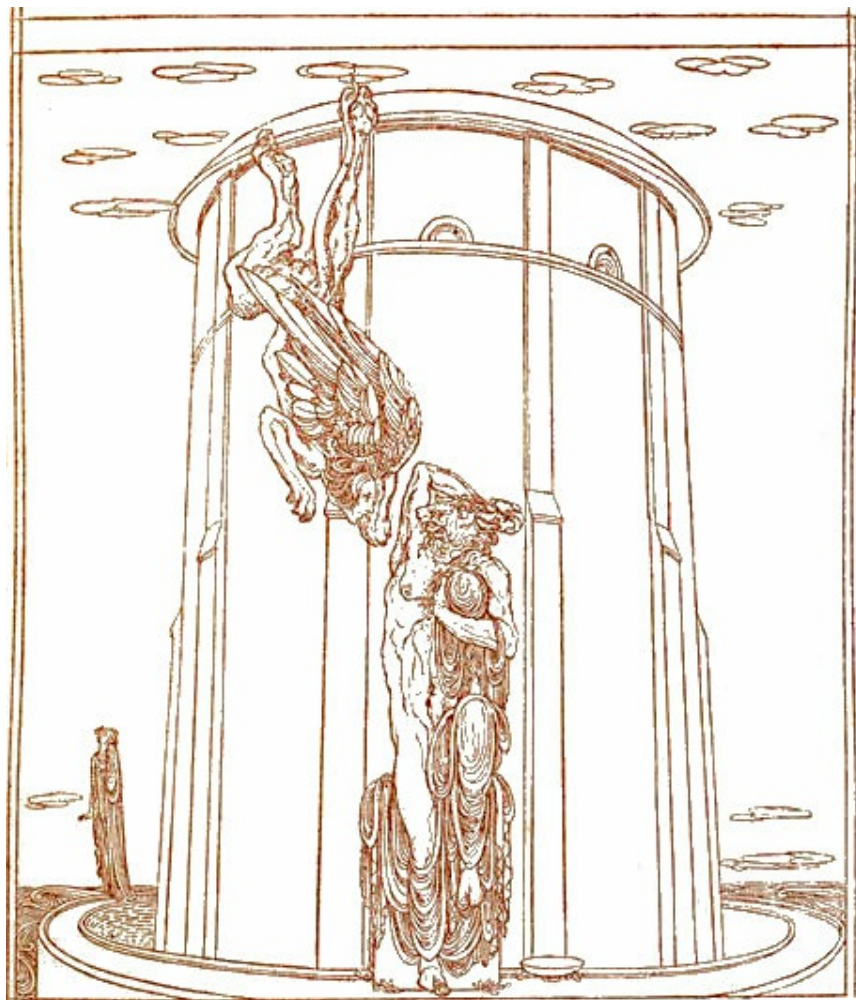
IN TERROR, AND A HORRID DEW DRIPPED FROM THE MOANING MANDRAGORES,

AND THE GREAT TORPID CROCODILE WITHIN THE TANK SHED SLIMY TEARS,

AND TARE THE JEWELS FROM HIS EARS AND STAGGERED BACK INTO THE NILE,

AND THE PRIESTS CURSED YOU WITH SHRILL PSALMS AS IN YOUR CLAWS YOU SEIZED THEIR
SNAKE

AND CREPT AWAY WITH IT TO SLAKE YOUR PASSION BY THE SHUDDERING PALMS



HO WERE YOUR LOVERS? WHO WERE THEY WHO WRESTLED FOR YOU IN THE DUST!

WHICH WAS THE VESSEL OF YOUR LUST? WHAT LEMAN HAD YOU, EVERY DAY?

DID GIANT LIZARDS COME AND CROUCH BEFORE YOU ON THE REEDY BANKS?

DID GRYPHONS WITH GREAT METAL FLANKS LEAP ON YOU IN YOUR TRAMPLED COUCH?

DID MONSTROUS HIPPOPOTAMI COME SIDLING TOWARD YOU IN THE MIST?

DID GILTSCALED DRAGONS WRITHE AND TWIST WITH PASSION AS YOU PASSED THEM BY?

AND FROM THE BRICKBUILT LYCIAN TOMB WHAT HORRIBLE CHIMAERA CAME

WITH FEARFUL HEADS AND FEARFUL FLAME TO BREED NEW WONDERS FROM YOUR WOMB?



R HAD YOU SHAMEFUL SECRET QUESTS AND DID YOU HARRY TO YOUR HOME
SOME NEREID COILED IN AMBER FOAM WITH CURIOUS ROCK CRYSTAL BREASTS?

OR DID YOU TREADING THROUGH THE FROTH CALL TO THE BROWN SIDONIAN
FOR TIDINGS OF LEVIATHAN, LEVIATHAN OR BEHEMOTH?

OR DID YOU WHEN THE SUN WAS SET CLIMB UP THE CACTUSCOVERED SLOPE
TO MEET YOUR SWARTHY ETHIOP WHOSE BODY WAS OF POLISHED JET?



OR DID YOU WHILE THE EARTHEN SKIFFS DROPPED DOWN THE GREY NILOTIC FLATS
AT TWILIGHT AND THE FLICKERING BATS FLEW ROUND THE TEMPLE'S TRIPLE GLYPHS

STEAL TO THE BORDER OF THE BAR AND SWIM ACROSS THE SILENT LAKE
AND SLINK INTO THE VAULT AND MAKE THE PYRAMID YOUR LÛPANAR

TILL FROM EACH BLACK SARCOPHAGUS ROSE UP THE PAINTED SWATHÈD DEAD?
OR DID YOU LURE UNTO YOUR BED THE IVORYHORNED TRAGELAPHOS?

OR DID YOU LOVE THE GOD OF FLIES WHO PLAGUED THE HEBREWS AND WAS SPLASHED
WITH WINE UNTO THE WAIST? OR PASHT, WHO HAD GREEN BERYLS FOR HER EYES?

OR THAT YOUNG GOD, THE TYRIAN, WHO WAS MORE AMOROUS THAN THE DOVE
OF ASHTAROTH? OR DID YOU LOVE THE GOD OF THE ASSYRIAN

WHOSE WINGS, LIKE STRANGE TRANSPARENT TALC, ROSE HIGH ABOVE HIS HAWKFACED HEAD,
PAINTED WITH SILVER AND WITH RED AND RIBBED WITH RODS OF OREICHALCH?

OR DID HUGE APIS FROM HIS CAR LEAP DOWN AND LAY BEFORE YOUR FEET
BIG BLOSSOMS OF THE HONEY-SWEET AND HONEY-COLOURED NENUPHAR?



OW SUBTLE-SECRET IS YOUR SMILE! DID YOU LOVE NONE THEN? NAY, I KNOW
GREAT AMMON WAS YOUR BEDFELLOW! HE LAY WITH YOU BESIDE THE NILE!

THE RIVER-HORSES IN THE SLIME TRUMPETED WHEN THEY SAW HIM COME
ODOROUS WITH SYRIAN GALBANUM AND SMEARED WITH SPIKENARD AND WITH THYME.

HE CAME ALONG THE RIVER-BANK LIKE SOME TALL GALLEY ARGENT-SAILED,
HE STRODE ACROSS THE WATERS, MAILED IN BEAUTY, AND THE WATERS SANK.

HE STRODE ACROSS THE DESERT SAND: HE REACHED THE VALLEY WHERE YOU LAY:
HE WAITED TILL THE DAWN OF DAY: THEN TOUCHED YOUR BLACK BREASTS WITH HIS HAND.

YOU KISSED HIS MOUTH WITH MOUTHS OF FLAME: YOU MADE THE HORNED GOD YOUR OWN:
YOU STOOD BEHIND HIM ON HIS THRONE: YOU CALLED HIM BY HIS SECRET NAME.

YOU WHISPERED MONSTROUS ORACLES INTO THE CAVERNS OF HIS EARS:
WITH BLOOD OF GOATS AND BLOOD OF STEERS YOU TAUGHT HIM MONSTROUS MIRACLES.

WHITE AMMON WAS YOUR BEDFELLOW! YOUR CHAMBER WAS THE STEAMING NILE!
AND WITH YOUR CURVED ARCHAIC SMILE YOU WATCHED HIS PASSION COME AND GO.



ITH SYRIAN OILS HIS BROWS WERE BRIGHT: AND WIDESPREAD AS A TENT AT
NOON

HIS MARBLE LIMBS MADE PALE THE MOON AND LENT THE DAY A LARGER LIGHT.

HIS LONG HAIR WAS NINE CUBITS' SPAN AND COLOURED LIKE THAT YELLOW GEM
WHICH HIDDEN IN THEIR GARMENT'S HEM THE MERCHANTS BRING FROM KURDISTAN.

HIS FACE WAS AS THE MUST THAT LIES UPON A VAT OF NEW-MADE WINE:
THE SEAS COULD NOT INSAPPHIRINE THE PERFECT AZURE OF HIS EYES.

HIS THICK SOFT THROAT WAS WHITE AS MILK AND THREADED WITH THIN VEINS OF BLUE:
AND CURIOUS PEARLS LIKE FROZEN DEW WERE BROIDERED ON HIS FLOWING SILK.



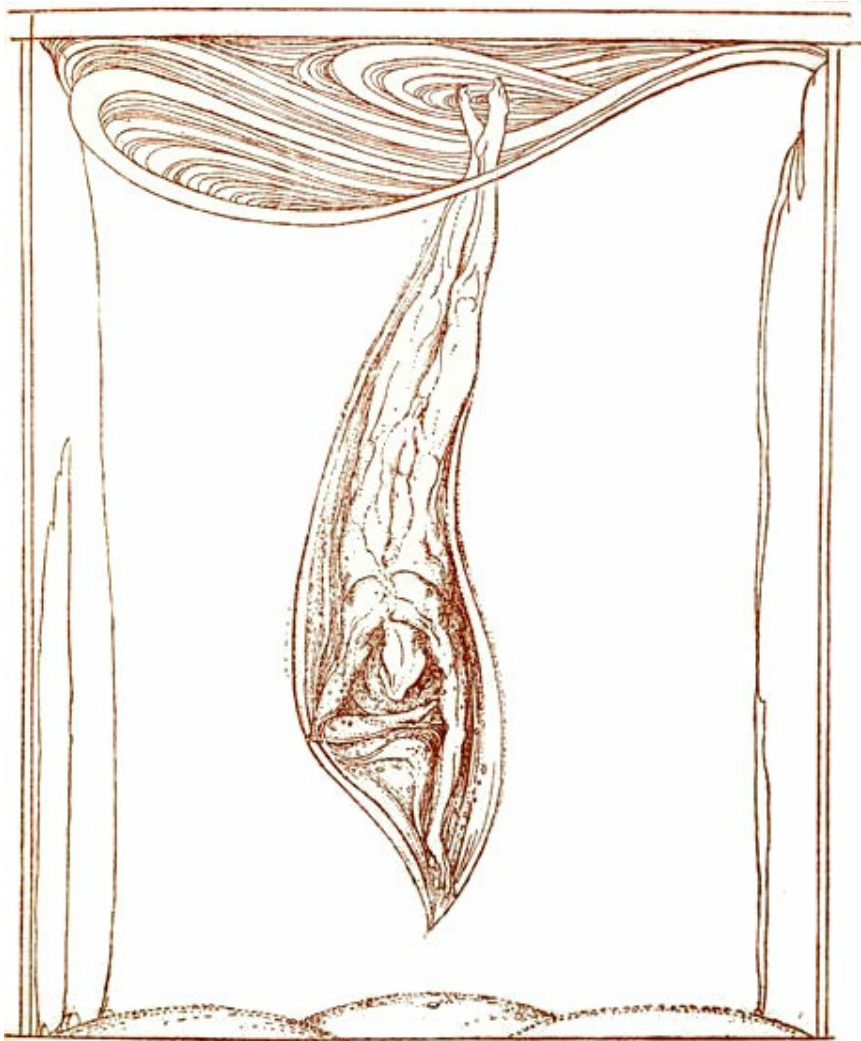
N PEARL AND PORPHYRY PEDESTALLED HE WAS TOO BRIGHT TO LOOK UPON:
FOR ON HIS IVORY BREAST THERE SHOWN THE WONDROUS OCEAN-EMERALD,

THAT MYSTIC MOONLIT JEWEL WHICH SOME DIVER OF THE COLCHIAN CAVES
HAD FOUND BENEATH THE BLACKENING WAVES AND CARRIED TO THE COLCHIAN WITCH.

BEFORE HIS GILDED GALIOT RAN NAKED VINEWREATHED CORYBANTS,
AND LINES OF SWAYING ELEPHANTS KNELT DOWN TO DRAW HIS CHARIOT,

AND LINES OF SWARTHY NUBIANS BARE UP HIS LITTER AS HE RODE
DOWN THE GREAT GRANITE-PAVEN ROAD BETWEEN THE NODDING PEACOCK-FANS.

THE MERCHANTS BROUGHT HIM STEATITE FROM SIDON IN THEIR PAINTED SHIPS:
THE MEANEST CUP THAT TOUCHED HIS LIPS WAS FASHIONED FROM A CHRYSOLITE.



THE MERCHANTS BROUGHT HIM CEDAR-CHESTS OF RICH APPAREL BOUND WITH CORDS:
HIS TRAIN WAS BORNE BY MEMPHIAN LORDS: YOUNG KINGS WERE GLAD TO BE HIS GUESTS.

TEN HUNDRED SHAVEN PRIESTS DID BOW TO AMMON'S ALTAR DAY AND NIGHT,
TEN HUNDRED LAMPS DID WAVE THEIR LIGHT THROUGH AMMON'S CARVEN HOUSE — AND NOW

FOUL SNAKE AND SPECKLED ADDER WITH THEIR YOUNG ONES CRAWL FROM STONE TO STONE
FOR RUINED IS THE HOUSE AND PRONE THE GREAT ROSE-MARBLE MONOLITH!

WILD ASS OR TROTTING JACKAL COMES AND COUCHES IN THE MOULDERING GATES;
WILD SATYRS CALL UNTO THEIR MATES ACROSS THE FALLEN FLUTED DRUMS.

AND ON THE SUMMIT OF THE PILE THE BLUEFACED APE OF HORUS SITS
AND GIBBERS WHILE THE FIGTREE SPLITS THE PILLARS OF THE PERISTYLE.

T

HE GOD IS SCATTERED HERE AND THERE: DEEP HIDDEN IN THE WINDY SAND
I SAW HIS GIANT GRANITE HAND STILL CLENCHED IN IMPOTENT DESPAIR,

AND MANY A WANDERING CARAVAN OF STATELY NEGROES SILKEN SHAWLED,
CROSSING THE DESERT, HALTS APPALLED BEFORE THE NECK THAT NONE CAN SPAN.

AND MANY A BEARDED BEDOUIN DRAWS BACK HIS YELLOW-STRIPED BURNOUS
TO GAZE UPON THE TITAN THEWS OF HIM WHO WAS THY PALADIN.



G

O, SEEK HIS FRAGMENTS ON THE MOOR AND WASH THEM IN THE EVENING DEW,

AND FROM THEIR PIECES MAKE ANEW THY MUTILATED PARAMOUR!

GO, SEEK THEM WHERE THEY LIE ALONE AND FROM THEIR BROKEN PIECES MAKE
THY BRUISED BEDFELLOW: AND WAKE MAD PASSIONS IN THE SENSELESS STONE!

CHARM HIS DULL EAR WITH SYRIAN HYMNS! HE LOVED YOUR BODY! OH, BE KIND,
POUR SPIKENARD ON HIS HAIR, AND WIND SOFT ROLLS OF LINEN ROUND HIS LIMBS!

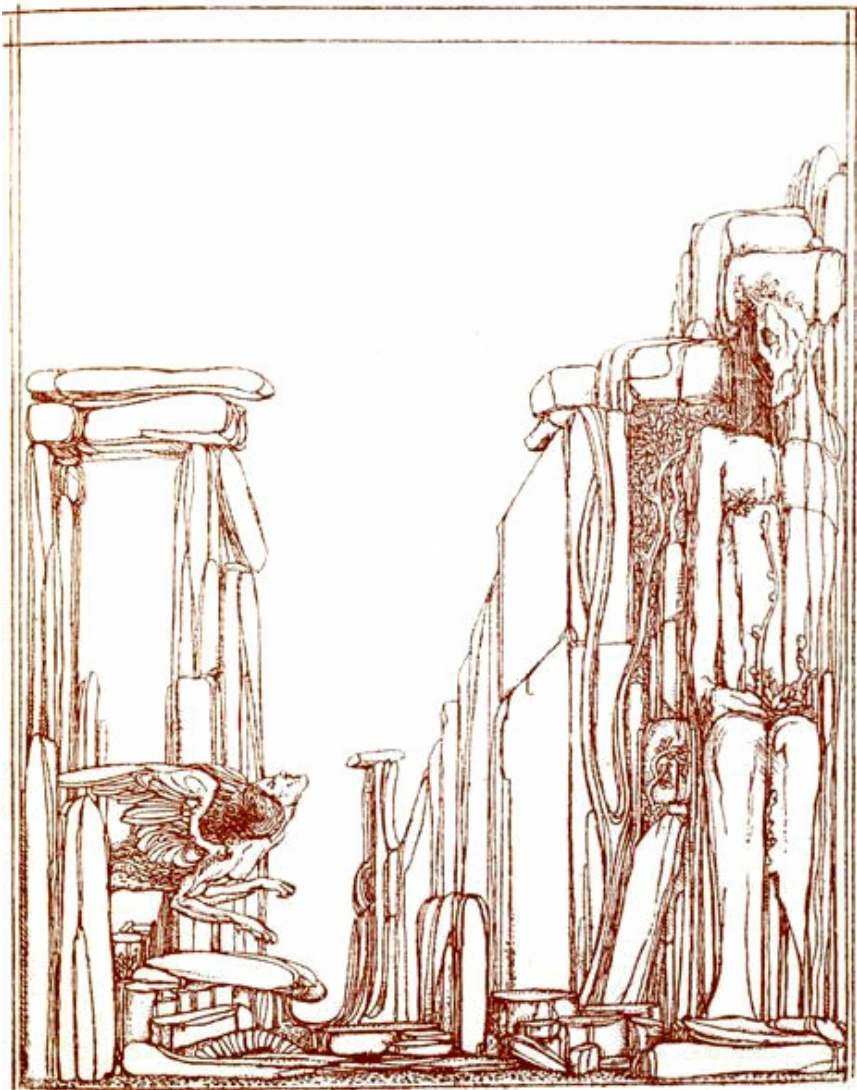
WIND ROUND HIS HEAD THE FIGURED COINS! STAIN WITH RED FRUITS THOSE PALLID LIPS!
WEAVE PURPLE FOR HIS SHRUNKEN HIPS! AND PURPLE FOR HIS BARREN LOINS!



WAY TO EGYPT! HAVE NO FEAR. ONLY ONE GOD HAS EVER DIED.
ONLY ONE GOD HAS LET HIS SIDE BE WOUNDED BY A SOLDIER'S SPEAR.

BUT THESE, THY LOVERS, ARE NOT DEAD. STILL BY THE HUNDREDCUBIT GATE
DOG-FACED ANUBIS SITS IN STATE WITH LOTUS-LILIES FOR THY HEAD.

STILL FROM HIS CHAIR OF PORPHYRY GAUNT MEMNON STRAINS HIS LIDLESS EYES
ACROSS THE EMPTY LAND, AND CRIES EACH YELLOW MORNING UNTO THEE.



AND NILUS WITH HIS BROKEN HORN LIES IN HIS BLACK AND OOZY BED
AND TILL THY COMING WILL NOT SPREAD HIS WATERS ON THE WITHERING CORN.

YOUR LOVERS ARE NOT DEAD, I KNOW. THEY WILL RISE UP AND HEAR YOUR VOICE
AND CLASH THEIR CYMBALS AND REJOICE AND RUN TO KISS YOUR MOUTH! AND SO,

SET WINGS UPON YOUR ARGOSIES! SET HORSES TO YOUR EBON CAR!
BACK TO YOUR NILE! OR IF YOU ARE GROWN SICK OF DEAD DIVINITIES

FOLLOW SOME ROVING LION'S SPOOR ACROSS THE COPPER-COLOURED PLAIN,
REACH OUT AND HALE HIM BY THE MANE AND BID HIM BE YOUR PARAMOUR!

COUCH BY HIS SIDE UPON THE GRASS AND SET YOUR WHITE TEETH IN HIS THROAT
AND WHEN YOU HEAR HIS DYING NOTE LASH YOUR LONG FLANKS OF POLISHED BRASS

AND TAKE A TIGER FOR YOUR MATE, WHOSE AMBER SIDES ARE FLECKED WITH BLACK,
AND RIDE UPON HIS GILDED BACK IN TRIUMPH THROUGH THE THEBAN GATE,

AND TOY WITH HIM IN AMOROUS JESTS, AND WHEN HE TURNS, AND SNARLS, AND GNAWS,
O SMITE HIM WITH YOUR JASPER CLAWS! AND BRUISE HIM WITH YOUR AGATE BREASTS!



HY ARE YOU TARRYING? GET HENCE! I WEARY OF YOUR SULLEN WAYS,
I WEARY OF YOUR STEADFAST GAZE, YOUR SOMNOLENT MAGNIFICENCE.

YOUR HORRIBLE AND HEAVY BREATH MAKES THE LIGHT FLICKER IN THE LAMP,
AND ON MY BROW I FEEL THE DAMP AND DREADFUL DEWS OF NIGHT AND DEATH.

YOUR EYES ARE LIKE FANTASTIC MOONS THAT SHIVER IN SOME STAGNANT LAKE,
YOUR TONGUE IS LIKE A SCARLET SNAKE THAT DANCES TO FANTASTIC TUNES,

YOUR PULSE MAKES POISONOUS MELODIES, AND YOUR BLACK THROAT IS LIKE THE HOLE
LEFT BY SOME TORCH OR BURNING COAL ON SARACENIC TAPESTRIES.

AWAY! THE SULPHUR-COLOURED STARS ARE HURRYING THROUGH THE WESTERN GATE!
AWAY! OR IT MAY BE TOO LATE TO CLIMB THEIR SILENT SILVER CARS!

SEE, THE DAWN SHIVERS ROUND THE GREY GILT-DIALED TOWERS, AND THE RAIN
STREAMS DOWN EACH DIAMONDED PANE AND BLURS WITH TEARS THE WANNISH DAY.

WHAT SNAKE-TRESSED FURY FRESH FROM HELL, WITH UNCOUTH GESTURES AND UNCLEAN,
STOLE FROM THE POPPY-DROWSY QUEEN AND LED YOU TO A STUDENT'S CELL?



HAT SONGLESS TONGUELESS GHOST OF SIN CREPT THROUGH THE CURTAINS OF
THE NIGHT,

AND SAW MY TAPER BURNING BRIGHT, AND KNOCKED, AND BADE YOU ENTER IN.

ARE THERE NOT OTHERS MORE ACCURSED, WHITER WITH LEPROSIES THAN I?

ARE ABANA AND PHARPHAR DRY THAT YOU COME HERE TO SLAKE YOUR THIRST?

GET HENCE, YOU LOATHSOME MYSTERY! HIDEOUS ANIMAL, GET HENCE!

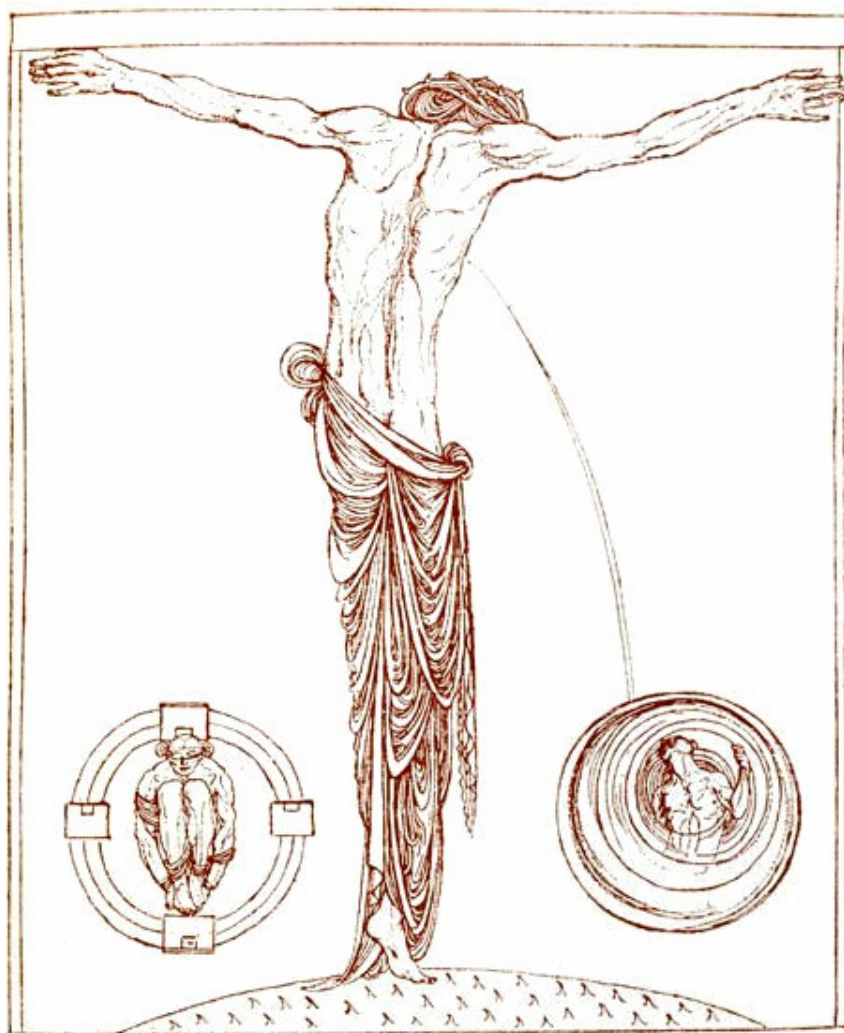
YOU WAKE IN ME EACH BESTIAL SENSE, YOU MAKE ME WHAT I WOULD NOT BE.

YOU MAKE MY CREED A BARREN SHAM, YOU WAKE FOUL DREAMS OF SENSUAL LIFE,

AND ATYS WITH HIS BLOOD-STAINED KNIFE WERE BETTER THAN THE THING I AM.



FALSE SPHINX! FALSE SPHINX! BY REEDY STYX OLD CHARON, LEANING ON HIS OAR,
WAITS FOR MY COIN. GO THOU BEFORE, AND LEAVE ME TO MY CRUCIFIX.



WHOSE PALLID BURDEN, SICK WITH PAIN, WATCHES THE WORLD WITH WEARIED EYES,
AND WEEPS FOR EVERY SOUL THAT DIES, AND WEEPS FOR EVERY SOUL IN VAIN.

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